
Multi-Level Cause-Effect Systems

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Abstract

We present a domain-general account of causation that applies to settings in which macro-level causal relations between two systems are of interest, but the relevant causal features are poorly understood and have to be aggregated from vast arrays of micro-measurements. Our approach generalizes that of Chalupka et al. (2015) to the setting in which the macro-level effect is not specified. We formalize the connection between micro- and macro-variables in such situations and provide a coherent framework describing causal relations at multiple levels of analysis. We present an algorithm that discovers macro-variable causes and effects from micro-level measurements obtained from an experiment. We further show how to design experiments to discover macro-variables from observational micro-variable data. Finally, we show that under specific conditions, one can identify multiple levels of causal structure. Throughout the article, we use a simulated neuroscience multi-unit recording experiment to illustrate the ideas and the algorithms.

1 INTRODUCTION

In many scientific domains, detailed measurement is an indirect tool to construct and identify macro-level features of interest which are not yet fully understood. For example, climate science uses satellite images and radar data to understand large scale weather patterns. In neuroscience, brain scans or neural recordings constitute the basis for research into cognition. In medicine, body monitors and gene sequencing are used to predict macro-level states of the human body, such as health outcomes. In each case the

aim is to use the micro-level data to discover what the relevant macro-level features are that drive, say, the “El Niño” weather pattern, face recognition or debilitating diseases. We propose a principled approach for the identification of macro-level causes and effects from high-dimensional micro-level measurements. Standard approaches to causation using graphical models (Spirtes et al., 2000; Pearl, 2009) or potential outcomes (Rubin, 1974) presuppose this step—these methods focus on discovering the causal relations among a *given* set of well-defined causal variables. Our approach does not rely on domain experts to identify the causal relations but constructs them automatically from data.

Throughout the article we use the setting of a neuroscientific experiment with high-dimensional input stimuli (images), and high-dimensional output measurements (multi-unit recordings) to illustrate our approach. We emphasize, however, that our theoretical results are entirely domain-general.

Our contribution is threefold:

1. We rigorously define how the constitutive relations (supervenience) between micro- and macro-variables combine with the causal relations among the macro-variables when both the macro-cause and macro-effect have not been pre-defined, but have to be constructed from micro-level data. The key concept is the *fundamental causal partition*, which is the coarsest macro-level description of the system that retains all the causal (but not merely correlational) information about it. We show how it can be learned from experimental data.
2. We prove a generalization of the Causal Coarsening Theorem of Chalupka et al. (2015) that now applies to high-dimensional input *and* high-dimensional output. The theorem enables efficient experiment design for learning the fundamental causal partition when experimental data is hard to obtain (but observational data is readily available).
3. We identify the conditions under which it is possible to have causal descriptions of a system at multiple levels of aggregation, and show how these can be learned.

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Code that implements our algorithms and reproduces the full simulated experiment is available online at <http://vision.caltech.edu/~kchalupk/code.html>.

1.1 A Motivating Example: Visual Neurons

Our research is partially inspired by a problem at the core of much of modern neuroscience: Can we detect which features of a visual stimulus result in particular responses of neural populations without pre-defining the stimulus features or the types of population response?

For example, Rutishauser et al. (2011) analyze data from multiple electrodes implanted in the human amygdala. The patient is asked to look at images containing either whole human faces, faces randomly occluded with Gaussian “bubbles”, or images of specific regions of interest in the face—say the eye or the mouth. The neurons are then sorted according to whether they are full-face selective or not, and the response properties of the neurons are analyzed in the two populations. This set-up is an instance of a widely used experimental protocol in the field: prepare stimuli that represent various hypotheses about what the neurons respond to; record from single or multiple units; and analyze the responses with respect to the candidate hypotheses.

But what if the candidate hypotheses are wrong? Or if they do not line up cleanly with the actually relevant features? Our method proposes a less biased and more automatized process of experimentation: Record neural population responses to a broad set of stimuli. Then jointly analyze what features of the stimuli modify responses of the neural population *and* what features of neural activity are changing in response to the stimuli. To our knowledge, such joint cause-and-effect learning is a novel contribution not only in the neuroscientific setting, but to a whole array of other scientific disciplines.

We will use a simple neural population response simulation as a running example throughout the article. In the simulation (see Fig. 1), we observe a population of 100 neurons which act spontaneously using dynamics defined by Izhikevich’s equations (Izhikevich, 2003). The equations are designed to reproduce the behavior of human cortical neurons. As the ground-truth structures of interest, we define simple macro-level causes and effects: Presented with an image containing a horizontal bar (h-bar), the “top half” of the neural population produces a pulse of joint activity after about 100ms. When presented with a vertical bar (v-bar), the same population synchronizes in a 30Hz rhythm after roughly the same delay. The remaining (“bottom half”) population acts independently of the visual stimuli (perhaps the experimenter unwittingly placed some of the electrodes in a non-visual brain area). Half the time these “distractor neurons” follow their spontaneous noisy dynamics, and half the time they synchronize to produce a

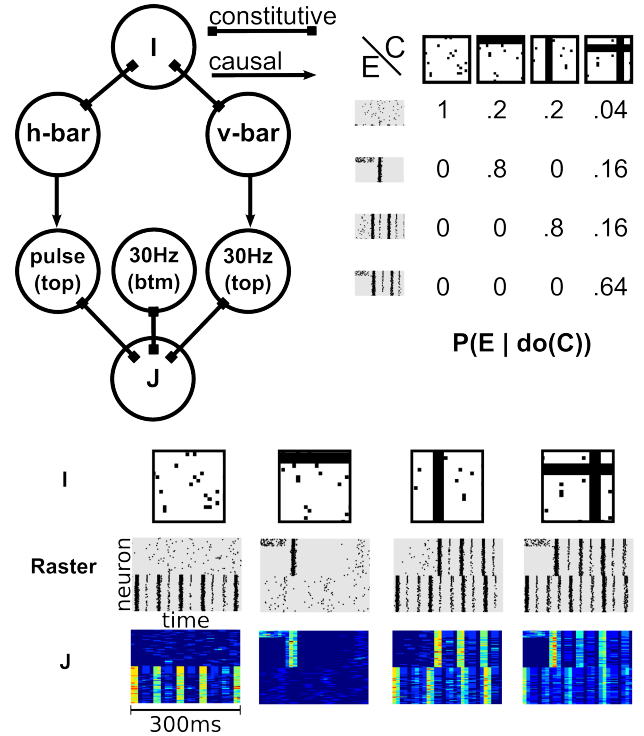


Figure 1: **A simulated neuroscience experiment.** A stimulus image *I* can contain a horizontal bar (h-bar), a vertical bar (v-bar), neither, or both (plus uniform pixel noise). In response to an image, a simulated population of neurons (the “top” population) can produce a single pulse of joint activity, a 30 Hz rhythm, both, or neither, with probabilities $P(\text{pulse} | \text{do}(\text{h-bar})) = 0.8$ and $P(30\text{Hz} | \text{do}(\text{v-bar})) = 0.8$. These two causal mechanisms compose to yield the full response probability table shown in the top right. In addition, another (“bottom”) population of neurons can exhibit a rhythmic activity independent of the stimulus image. The system’s output *J* is a 10ms-window running average of the neural rasters, with the neuron indices shuffled (as a neuroscientist has no a-priori knowledge of how to order neurons). Here we show example *J*’s sorted by neuron id; we use the shuffled version in our experiments.

rhythmic activity. One can think of this activity as being caused by internal network dynamics, extra-visual stimuli or any other cause, as long as it is independent of the image presented by the experimenter.

The example is made up of deliberately simple features for ease of illustration and interpretation. Nevertheless, it hints at what makes similar problems non-trivial to solve. The causal features can be convoluted with salient, probabilistic structure (such as the rhythmic behaviors generated in the “bottom” neuronal population). Moreover, the data and its features can be difficult to interpret directly “by looking”: after reshuffling the neural indices, the raster plots are hardly distinguishable by the human eye. In many domains (e.g. in finance) the data have no special spatial structure

in the first place, since they can consist simply of rows of numbers.

2 MACRO-CAUSES AND -EFFECTS

Chalupka et al. (2015) provide a method to discover from image pixels the macro-level visual cause of a pre-defined macro-level “target behavior”. In contrast, we do not assume that the macro-level effect (their “target behavior”) is already specified. Instead, in a generalization of their framework, we simultaneously recover the macro-level cause C and effect E from micro-variable data. Adopting much of their notation, we repeat and generalize their main definitions here, and refer the reader to the original paper for a more detailed explanation.

2.1 Multi-Level Systems: a Generative Model

Let $\mathcal{I} \subset \mathbb{R}^m$ and $\mathcal{J} \subset \mathbb{R}^n$ be two finite sets of possibly huge cardinality – for example, \mathcal{I} could be the set of all the 100×100 32-bit RGB images¹. Let I and J be the random variables ranging over those respective sets. We are interested in systems that are well described by the generative model shown in Fig. 2, which we call a (causal) *multi-level system*, or *ml-system*, for reasons that will become evident. In an ml-system, the probability distribution over I is determined by an independent “noise” variable ϵ_I and a (confounding) variable H . Both ϵ_I and H are assumed to be discrete but can have very high cardinality. J is generated analogously, except that it is also caused by I . The joint probability distribution over I and J is thus given by:

$$P(J, I) = \sum_H P(J | I, H) P(I | H) P(H).$$

The independent noise variables ϵ_I and ϵ_J are marginalized out and omitted in the above equation for clarity.

2.2 The Fundamental Causal Partition

An important challenge of causal analysis is to distinguish between dependencies invariant under intervention and those that arise due to confounding. That is, following Pearl (2009) we want to distinguish between the observational conditional probability of $P(Y | X)$ for two variables X and Y and the causal probability arising from an intervention on X , namely, $P(Y | \text{do}(X))$. An ml-system is sufficiently general to represent dependencies between I and J that remain invariant under intervention and those that are only due to confounding (by H).

In addition, we want to distinguish between micro-variables and the macro-variables that stand in a *constitutive* relation to the micro-variables: An intervention on

¹In this article we will adopt the common practice of referring to such digitalized continuous data as “high-dimensional”.

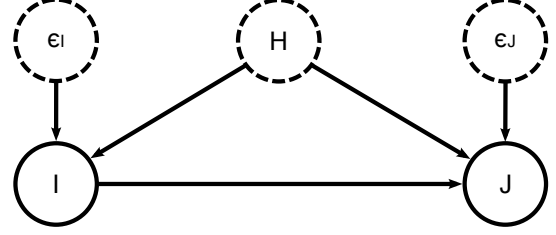


Figure 2: **The generative model of a causal ml-system.** Dashed nodes indicate variables that are not measured. All variables are discrete but can be of huge cardinality. The “input” I causes the “output” J . In addition, the two can be confounded by a hidden variable H . Finally, I can contain information independent of J (and vice-versa). For example, in Fig. 1 the “lower” population of neurons is driven by a random process, but is independent of the contents of the visual stimulus.

the micro-variables fixes the macro-variables (for example, the exact spiking time of every neuron determines whether or not a pulse is present), while an intervention on the macro-variable (e.g. the presence of a 30Hz neural rhythm) may not uniquely fix the states of the micro-variables that constitute the macro-variable. We follow Chalupka et al. (2015) in first defining a micro-level manipulation, and reserving Pearl’s $\text{do}()$ -operation for the interventions on a macro-variable:

Definition 1 (Micro-level Manipulation). A micro-level manipulation is the operation $\text{man}(I = i)$ (we will often simply write $\text{man}(i)$ for a specific manipulation) that changes the micro-variables of I to $i \in \mathcal{I}$, while not (directly) affecting any other variables (such as H or J). That is, the manipulated probability distribution of the generative model in Eq. (1) is given by

$$P(J | \text{man}(I = i)) = \sum_H P(J | I = i, H) P(H).$$

Our goal is to define (and then learn) the most compressed description of an ml-system that retains all the information about the causal effect of I on J , that is, we want the most efficient description of the possible interventions on I and their effects on J .

Definition 2 (Fundamental Causal Partition, Causal Class). Let $(\mathcal{I}, \mathcal{J})$ be a causal ml-system. The fundamental causal partition of \mathcal{I} , denoted by $\Pi_c(\mathcal{I})$ is the partition induced by the equivalence relation \sim_I such that

$$i_1 \sim_I i_2 \iff \forall_{j \in \mathcal{J}} P(j | \text{man}(i_1)) = P(j | \text{man}(i_2)).$$

Similarly, the fundamental causal partition of \mathcal{J} , denoted by $\Pi_c(\mathcal{J})$, is the partition induced by the equivalence relation \sim_J such that

$$j_1 \sim_J j_2 \iff \forall_{i \in \mathcal{I}} P(j_1 | \text{man}(i)) = P(j_2 | \text{man}(i)).$$

We call a cell of a causal partition a causal class of I or J .

In words, two elements of \mathcal{I} belong to the same causal class if they have the same causal effect on J . Two elements of \mathcal{J} belong to the same causal class if they arise equally likely after any micro-level manipulation of I . The causal classes are thus good candidates for our causal macro-variables:

Definition 3 (Fundamental Cause and Effect). *In a causal ml-system $(\mathcal{I}, \mathcal{J})$, the fundamental cause C is a random variable whose value stands in a bijective relation to the causal class of I . The fundamental effect E is a random variable whose value stands in a bijective relation to the causal class of J . We will also use C and E to denote the functions that map each i and j , respectively, to its causal class.² We will thus write, for example, $C(i) = c$ to indicate that the causal cell of i is c .*

When the fundamental cause and effect are non-trivial, i.e. when their values correspond to non-singleton sets of micro-states, then we refer to them as *causal macro-variables*. Figure 1 illustrates the ground-truth fundamental cause and effect in our simulated neuroscience experiment. The cause C has four states: presence of a vertical bar (v-bar), presence of a horizontal bar (h-bar), presence of both and presence of neither in the image I . C causes the effect E , which also has four states: presence of pulse, rhythm, both or neither in the activity of a population of neurons in a raster plot. The precise details of these structures (locations of the bars; exact neural spiking times) are irrelevant to the causal interactions in the system, as are the uniform noise in the stimulus images or the strong rhythm generated by the “bottom” population of neurons. Despite being an aggregate of micro-variables, C is a well-defined “causal variable” as used in the standard framework of causal graphical models. We can define, in a principled way, an intervention on it (analogously for E):

Definition 4 (Macro-level Causal Intervention). *The operation $do(C = c)$ on a macro-level cause is given by a manipulation of the underlying micro-variable $man(I = i)$ to some value i such that $C(i) = c$.*

We can now state the first part of a two-part theorem that justifies the name *fundamental* causal partition. Intuitively, knowing the fundamental causal partition of a system tells us everything there is to know about the causal mechanism implicit in $P(J \mid man(I))$: Any coarser partition loses some information, any finer partition contains no further causal information.

Theorem 5 (Sufficient Causal Description, Part 1). *Let $(\mathcal{I}, \mathcal{J})$ be a causal ml-system and let E be its fundamental causal effect. Let \mathbf{E} be E applied sample-wise (for example, $\mathbf{E}(j_1, \dots, j_k) = (E(j_1), \dots, E(j_k))$). Then among all the partitions of \mathcal{J} , \mathbf{E} is the minimal sufficient statistic for $P(J \mid man(i))$ for any $i \in \mathcal{I}$.*

²In a slight abuse of terminology we will at times use the causal macro-variables to refer to their (bijectively) corresponding partitions, for example, “ \bar{C} is a coarsening of \bar{C} ”.

The proof (in Supplementary Material A) is a standard application of Fisher’s factorization theorem. Unfortunately, the theorem does not do justice to the intuition that the fundamental cause, too, compresses information about the causal mechanisms of the system. However, unless we assume a distribution $P(man(I))$ over the interventions, we cannot apply the notion of a sufficient statistic to manipulations in the \mathcal{I} space. Following Pearl’s approach, we refrain from specifying intervention distributions and instead return to this question using a different technique in Sec. 4.

3 LEARNING THE FUNDAMENTAL CAUSAL STRUCTURE

We first show how to learn causal macro-variables from *experimental* data, sampled directly from $P(J \mid man(I))$. Experimental data is generally costly to obtain, so in the following section we prove the Fundamental Causal Coarsening Theorem that shows one can use *observational* data sampled according to $P(J \mid I)$ to minimize the number of experiments needed to establish the fundamental causal partitions.

3.1 Learning With Experimental Data

Consider a dataset $\{(i, j)\}$ of size N generated experimentally from a causal ml-system $(\mathcal{I}, \mathcal{J})$: each i is chosen by the experimenter arbitrarily, and each j is generated from $P(J \mid man(i))$. Algorithm 1 takes such data as input, and computes the fundamental cause and effect of the system. We relegate the detailed discussion of the algorithm (as well as the details of our implementation) to Supplementary Material B. Here, instead, we provide a step-by-step illustration of the algorithm’s application to the simulated neuroscience problem from Sec. 1.1.

We generated 10000 images i similar to those shown in Fig. 1: 2500 h-bar images (with varying h-bar locations and uniform pixel noise), 2500 v-bar images, 2500 “h-bar + v-bar” images and 2500 uniform noise images. Of course, this is an ideal dataset that we can only design because we know the ground-truth causal features. In practice, the experimenter would want to choose as broad a class of stimuli as reasonable. Next, for each image we generated a corresponding time-averaged, neuron-index-shuffled raster plot j according to $P(J \mid man(i))$. We then applied Alg. 1 to this experimental data. The output is for each image i an estimate of its causal class $C(i)$, and for each raster j an estimate of its effect class $E(j)$, as defined in Fig. 1.

Figure 4 shows how Alg. 1 recovers the macro-variable causal mechanism of our simulated single-unit-recording experiment. Three remarks are in order:

1. For purposes of illustration, the macro-level causal variables are very simple. Nevertheless, the procedure is completely general and could be applied to detect

Algorithm 1: Learning the Fundamental Cause and Effect

input : $\mathcal{D}_{csl} = \{(i_1, j_1), \dots, (i_N, j_N)\}$ – causal data.
 $j_k \sim P(J \mid \text{man}(i_k)), 1 \leq j \leq N$.
 DensLearn – a density learning routine.
 Clstr – a clustering routine.
 Clsfy – a classification routine.

output: $C: \mathcal{I} \rightarrow \{1, \dots, S_C\}$ – the fundamental cause.
 $E: \mathcal{J} \rightarrow \{1, \dots, S_E\}$ – the fundamental effect.

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1  $P_{J|i} \leftarrow \text{DensLearn}(\mathcal{D}_{csl});$ 
2  $Eft_{mic} \leftarrow \{[P_{J|i}(i, j_1), \dots, P_{J|i}(i, j_N)] \mid i \in \mathcal{I}\};$ 
3  $Cs_{mic} \leftarrow \{[P_{J|i}(i_1, j), \dots, P_{J|i}(i_N, j)] \mid j \in \mathcal{J}\};$ 
4  $C' \leftarrow \text{Clstr}(Eft_{mic});$  //  $\text{range}(C') = \{1, \dots, S_C\}$ 
5  $E' \leftarrow \text{Clstr}(Cs_{mic});$  //  $\text{range}(E') = \{1, \dots, S_E\}$ 
6  $Eft_{mac} \leftarrow \{[P(e_1|c), \dots, P(e_{S_E}|c)] \mid c = 1, \dots, S_C\};$ 
7  $Cs_{mac} \leftarrow \{[P(e|c_1), \dots, P(e|c_{S_C})] \mid e = 1, \dots, S_E\};$ 
8 Merge  $C'$  clusters with similar  $Eft_{mac}$  values.;
9 Merge  $E'$  clusters with similar  $Cs_{mac}$  values.;
10  $C \leftarrow \text{Clsfy}((i_1, C'(i_1)), \dots, (i_N, C'(i_N)));$ 
11  $E \leftarrow \text{Clsfy}((j_1, E'(j_1)), \dots, (j_N, E'(j_N)));$ 
    
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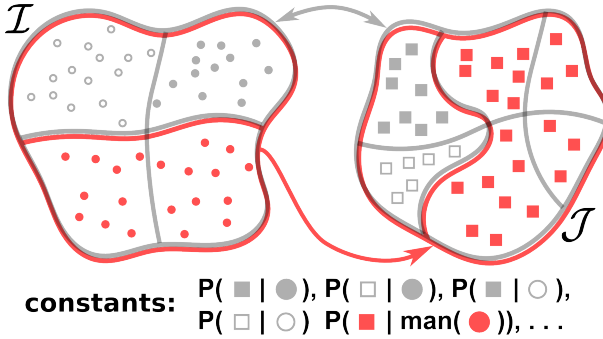


Figure 3: The Fundamental Causal Coarsening Theorem (FCCT). Gray lines delineate the observational partitions on \mathcal{I} and \mathcal{J} . Observational probabilities are constant within the gray regions: for any pair i_1, i_2 belonging to the same \mathcal{I} region, and any pair j_1, j_2 belonging to the same \mathcal{J} region, $P(j_1 \mid i_1) = P(j_1 \mid i_2) = P(j_2 \mid i_1) = P(j_2 \mid i_2)$. Red lines delineate the causal partition: within each red region, probabilities of causation $P(j \mid \text{man}(i))$ are equal. FCCT states that in general, the causal partition coarsens the observational partition, as in the picture.

causal macro-variables that do not admit such a simple description. We believe the method holds promise for applications in a broad set of scientific domains.

2. The algorithm does not simply cluster \mathcal{I} and \mathcal{J} . Instead, it clusters the probabilistic effects of points in \mathcal{I} , and the probabilities of causation for points in \mathcal{J} . Its crucial function is to ignore any structures that are not related to the causal effect of I on J . In our example, the raster plots contain salient structure that is causally irrelevant: With probability 0.5, the “bottom” subpop-

ulation of neurons spikes in a synchronized rhythm. Simply clustering \mathcal{J} would sub-divide the true causal classes in half. Fig. 4e shows that the algorithm finds the correct solution.

3. There are many possible alternatives to Alg. 1, each with different advantages and disadvantages. The particular solution we chose is a direct application of the definitions, and works well in practice. However, it does introduce additional assumptions — in particular, $p(J \mid \text{man}(I))$ needs to be smooth both as a function of j and i for the algorithm to work perfectly.

3.2 The Fundamental Coarsening Theorem and Experiment Design

If only data sampled from $P(J \mid I)$ is available, it is in general impossible to determine the fundamental causal partition. The causal effect from I to J cannot always be separated from the confounding due to H (recall Fig. 1). Instead, we can directly apply Alg. 1 to the observational data to obtain the *observational partition* of a causal ml-system:

Definition 6 (Observational Partition, Observational Class). Let $(\mathcal{I}, \mathcal{J})$ be a causal ml-system. The observational partition of \mathcal{I} , denoted by $\Pi_o(\mathcal{I})$, is the partition induced by the equivalence relation \sim_I such that $i_1 \sim_I i_2$ if and only if $P(J \mid I = i_1) = P(J \mid I = i_2)$. The observational partition of \mathcal{J} , denoted by $\Pi_o(\mathcal{J})$, is the partition induced by the equivalence relation \sim_J such that $j_1 \sim_J j_2$ if and only if $\forall i \in \mathcal{I} P(j_1 \mid i) = P(j_2 \mid i)$. A cell of an observational partition is called an *observational class* (of \mathcal{I} or \mathcal{J}).

Spurious correlates can introduce structure in Π_o that is irrelevant to Π_c (see Eq. (1) and the discussion on spurious correlates in Chalupka et al. (2015)). Nevertheless, we can aim to minimize the number of experiments needed to obtain the fundamental causal partition. The following theorem (which generalizes the Causal Coarsening Theorem of (Chalupka et al., 2015)) shows that in general, observational data can be efficiently transformed into causal knowledge about an ml-system.

Theorem 7 (Fundamental Causal Coarsening). Among all the generative distributions of the form shown in Fig. 2 which induce given observational partitions $(\Pi_o(\mathcal{I}), \Pi_o(\mathcal{J}))$:

1. The subset of distributions that induce a fundamental causal partition $\Pi_c(\mathcal{I})$ that is not a coarsening of the observational partition $\Pi_o(\mathcal{I})$ is Lebesgue measure zero, and
2. The subset of distributions that induce a fundamental causal partition $\Pi_c(\mathcal{J})$ that is not a coarsening of the $\Pi_o(\mathcal{J})$ is Lebesgue measure zero.

In other words, the observational partition over \mathcal{I} may subdivide some cells of the causal partition, but not *vice-versa*,

and the observational partition over \mathcal{J} may subdivide some cells of the causal partition, but not *vice-versa*. Fig. 3 illustrates the Fundamental Causal Coarsening Theorem (FCCT).

We prove the theorem in Supplementary Material C. FCCT suggests an efficient way to learn causal features of a system starting with observational data only: first, learn the observational partition using Alg. 1. Next, pick (at least) one i belonging to each observational class and estimate $P(J \mid \text{man}(i))$. To obtain the causal partition, merge the observational cells whose i 's induce the same distribution over J . Then, pick at least one j from each observational class and merge the cells whose j 's induce the same $P(j \mid \text{man}(i))$ for all $i \in \mathcal{I}$.

4 SUBSIDIARY CAUSES AND EFFECTS

The behavior of our simulated neural population is affected by two independent causal mechanisms: the presence of a v-bar can create a neural pulse, and the presence of an h-bar can induce a 30Hz neural rhythm. We wrote “ $P(30\text{Hz} = 1 \mid \text{do}(\text{v-bar} = 1)) = .8$ and $P(\text{pulse} = 1 \mid \text{do}(\text{h-bar} = 1)) = .8$ ”, and said that these two mechanisms compose to bring about the observed effects. We now formalize under what conditions higher-level variables, such as “30Hz” or “v-bar”, can arise from the fundamental causal partition.

Definition 8 (Subsidiary Causal Variables). *Let C and E be the fundamental cause and effect of a causal ml-system. Let \bar{C} and \bar{E} be strict coarsenings of C and E . Denote by $c_1(l), \dots, c_{N_l}(l)$ the cells of C that belong to the l -th cell of \bar{C} . We say that \bar{C} and \bar{E} are subsidiary causal variables, and that \bar{C} is a subsidiary cause of the subsidiary effect \bar{E} if (i) $\forall l P(\bar{E} \mid \text{do}(C = c_1(l))) = \dots = P(\bar{E} \mid \text{do}(C = c_{N_l}(l)))$, and (ii) $P(\bar{E} \mid \text{do}(\bar{C} = \bar{c}_1)) \neq P(\bar{E} \mid \text{do}(\bar{C} = \bar{c}_2))$ for any distinct \bar{c}_1 and \bar{c}_2 in the range of \bar{C} .*

According to the definition, any coarsening of C and E that aspires to be a subsidiary cause-effect pair has to satisfy two conditions. First, manipulations on the subsidiary cause \bar{C} have to be well-defined. The definition guarantees that any two i_1, i_2 for which $\bar{C}(i_1) = \bar{C}(i_2)$ generate the same distribution over the subsidiary effect, so that $P(\bar{E} \mid \text{do}(\bar{C} = \bar{C}(i_1))) = P(\bar{E} \mid \text{do}(\bar{C} = \bar{C}(i_2)))$. In our example, producing an image with an h-bar induces the neural pulse with probability .8. The probability of the pulse is indifferent to the presence/absence of a v-bar (or any other structure) in the image (see also Fig. 5a,b). On the other hand, we claimed that v-bars cause rhythms, not pulses (see Fig. 5c). What shows formally that v-bars do not cause pulses? Producing an image i with a v-bar but no h-bar gives us $P(\text{pulse} \mid \text{man}(i)) = 0$, but if i contains both h- and v-bars, we have $P(\text{pulse} \mid \text{man}(i)) = .8$. This disagrees with our definition of what it takes to be a causal variable: the manipulation on the macro-cause v-bar is not well-defined with respect to the macro-effect

Algorithm 2: Finding Subsidiary Variables

input : C, E – the fundamental cause and effect (and the corresponding partitions).
output: $\mathcal{S} = (C^1, E^1), \dots, (C^N, E^N)$ – subsidiary variables of the system.

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1  $\mathcal{S} \leftarrow \emptyset$ ;
2  $c_1, \dots, c_m \leftarrow \text{range}(C)$ ;
3  $e_1, \dots, e_n \leftarrow \text{range}(E)$ ;
4 for  $\bar{E} \in \text{Partitions}(E)$  do
5   for  $\bar{e} \in \text{range}(\bar{E})$  do
6      $P(\bar{e} \mid \text{do}(C = c_k)) \leftarrow \sum_{e_l \in \bar{e}} P(e_l \mid \text{do}(C = c_k))$ ;
7   end
8   Define effect:  $c_k \mapsto P(\bar{E} \mid \text{do}(C = c_k))$ ;
9   Let  $c_i \sim_{\bar{C}} c_j \Leftrightarrow \text{effect}(c_i) = \text{effect}(c_j)$ ;
10   $\Pi_{\bar{C}} \leftarrow$  partition of  $\text{range}(C)$  induced by  $\sim_{\bar{C}}$ ;
11   $\bar{C} \leftarrow$  random variable corresponding to  $\Pi_{\bar{C}}$ ;
12   $\mathcal{S} \leftarrow \mathcal{S} \cup (\bar{C}, \bar{E})$ ;
13 end
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pulse, as the effects of micro-variables belonging to the same macro-variable causal class are not the same. We have what Spirtes and Scheines (2004) call an “ambiguous manipulation” of v-bar with respect to the pulse.

The second condition in the definition ensures that the values of subsidiary causes are only distinct when they have distinct effects. A succinct answer to the question “what causes the neural pulse?” is “the presence of a horizontal bar” — not “two states: one corresponding to the presence of a horizontal bar along with the presence of a vertical bar; the other corresponding to the presence of a horizontal bar without the presence of a vertical bar”. Two states with the same probabilistic effect should be combined.

Together, the two conditions ensure that subsidiary causes and effects allow for well-defined, parsimonious manipulations. Equipped with the notion of subsidiary causal variables and an understanding of what it takes to define $P(\bar{E} \mid \text{do}(\bar{C}))$, we can complete our Sufficient Causal Description theorem:

Theorem 9 (Sufficient Causal Description, Part 2). *The fundamental causal variables C and E losslessly recover $P(j \mid \text{man}(i))$. No other (subsidiary) causal variables losslessly recover $P(j \mid \text{man}(i))$. Any other partition of $(\mathcal{I}, \mathcal{J})$ is either finer than C and E or does not define unambiguous manipulations. In this sense, the fundamental causal partition corresponds to the coarsest partition that losslessly recovers $P(j \mid \text{man}(i))$.*

The proof is provided in Supplementary Material A. The theorem suggests that the use of subsidiary variables is to ignore causal information that is not of interest. For example, having discovered the fundamental effects of images

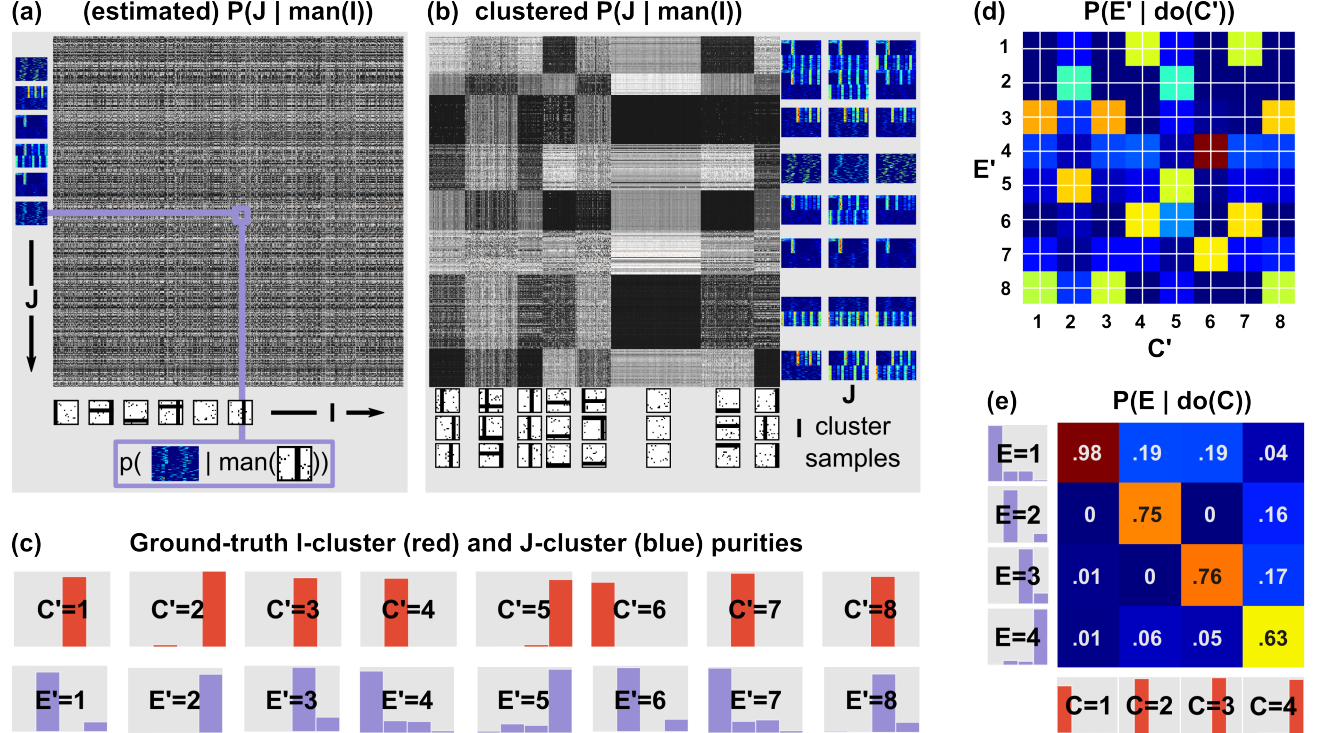


Figure 4: Learning the fundamental causal partition. The figure demonstrates Algorithm 1 applied to the example from Fig. 1. **(a)** Given a dataset $\{(i_k, j_k)\}_{k=1 \dots N}$, the algorithm learns data density $P(j | \text{man}(i))$ and forms a matrix in which the kl -th entry is the estimated $P(j_k | \text{man}(i_l))$. **(b)** The rows and columns of the matrix are clustered. Each cluster of columns corresponds to a cell of C' , the proposed fundamental partition of \mathcal{I} , and each cluster of rows corresponds to a cell of E' , the proposed fundamental partition of \mathcal{J} . **(c)** The histograms show the ground-truth causal class of the points in each cluster (this ground truth is unknown to the algorithm). For example, the cell $E' = 8$ contains a majority of raster plots that contain the “30Hz (top)” causal structure; it also contains some “30Hz (top) + pulse” rasters. **(d)** The algorithm computes the probability table $P(E' | \text{do}(C'))$ by counting the co-occurrences of the cluster labels. **(e)** Finally, the columns of this table are merged according to their similarity to form the fundamental partition Π_C , and the rows are merged to form Π_E . For example, columns $C' = 1$ and $C' = 3$ of the table in (d) are similar—indeed, the cluster purity histograms indicate that both rows correspond to sets of images with a vertical bar. $P(E | \text{do}(C))$ is very similar to the ground-truth table (see Fig. 1), and the final C, E clusters are pure (as shown along the axes of the table).

on a brain region the neuroscientist might want to focus on the subsidiary effects whose analogues were observed in other brain regions, or in other animals. Alg. 2 shows a simple (yet combinatorially expensive) procedure to discover the full set of subsidiary causes and effects in an ml-system. The algorithm iterates over all the possible coarsenings of E , the fundamental effect, and computes, for each, the corresponding coarsening (not necessarily strict) of the fundamental cause that adheres to Def. 8.

To complete the picture of how the fundamental and subsidiary variables relate to each other, we formalize the intuition that the fundamental causal partition can be a product of its subsidiary variables. Recall that we have defined causal macro-variables as partitions of sets of values of random micro-variables. The composition of causal variables is defined in terms of the product of partitions.

Definition 10 (Partition Product, Macro-Variable Composition). *Let Π_1 and Π_2 be partitions of the same set X . The*

product of the partitions, denoted $\Pi_1 \otimes \Pi_2$, is the coarsest partition of X that is a refinement of both Π_1 and Π_2 . The set of partitions of X forms a commutative monoid under \otimes . The composition C of two causal macro-variables C_1 and C_2 is defined as the product of the corresponding partitions. In this case, we will use the \otimes operator to write $C = C_1 \otimes C_2$.

Finally, we describe a special class of subsidiary variables to gain additional insight into the fundamental causal structure of ml-systems.

Definition 11 (Non-Interacting Subsidiary Variables). *Let C^1, C^2 be subsidiary causes with respective subsidiary effects E^1, E^2 . Denote by (e_1, e_2) the cell of $E^1 \otimes E^2$ that corresponds to the intersection of a cell e^1 of E^1 and cell e^2 of E^2 , and analogously for (c_1, c_2) . C^1 and C^2 are non-interactive if for any non-empty (c_1, c_2) and (e_1, e_2) we have $P(E^1 \otimes E^2 = (e_1, e_2) | \text{do}(C^1 \otimes C^2 = (c_1, c_2))) = P(E^1 = e_1 | \text{do}(C^1 = c_1)) \times P(E^2 = e_2 | \text{do}(C^2 = c_2))$.*

Among all the possible ml-systems, the fundamental causal partition gives rise to *no subsidiary causes* in almost all the cases. The presence of coarse, non-interacting subsidiary causes (such as the h-bar and the v-bar in our example) is a strong indicator of independent physical causal mechanisms that produce symmetries in the fundamental causal structure of the system. Our framework enables the scientist to automatically detect such independent mechanisms from data.

For example, let C^1 = “presence of h-bar”, C^2 = “presence of v-bar”, E^1 = “presence of pulse”, E^2 = “presence of rhythm (top)”. We can discover these variables from data using Alg. 1 followed by Alg. 2, and check that indeed they are non-interacting. In fact, these two subsidiary variables compose to yield the fundamental causal partition and its probability table – we can write $C = C^1 \otimes C^2$ and $E = E^1 \otimes E^2$ (see Fig. 5d).

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In general it is possible that macro-variable causes and effects are barely coarser (if at all) than the corresponding micro-variables. The hope that C and E have a “manageable” cardinality, such as those in Fig. 1, is similar in spirit to standard assumptions in both supervised and unsupervised learning. There, a set of continuous data is clustered into a discrete number of subsets according to some feature of interest. Here the “feature of interest” is the causal relationship between C and E .

Given that discussion of macro-causal relations is commonplace in scientific discourse, we take the scientific endeavors mentioned in the introduction to be predicated on the assumption that micro-level descriptions are not all there is to the phenomena under investigation. Whether or not there in fact are macro-level causes that justify such an assumption is, in light of our theoretical account, an empirical question. Taking the definitions literally, macro-causes cannot be defined arbitrarily. Finally we note an implicit assumption we made, that the micro-variables do not lump together atoms that belong to different “true fundamental partition” cells. What happens when this assumption is violated is an open question.

Our approach to the automated construction of causal macro-variables is rooted in the theory of computational mechanics (Shalizi and Crutchfield, 2001; Shalizi, 2001; Shalizi and Shalizi, 2004). Even though we have focused on learning from experimental data, we cleanly account for the interventional/observational distinction that is central to most analyses of causation. This distinction is entirely lost in heuristic approaches, such as that of Hoel et al. (2013). Finally, we note that our work is orthogonal to recent efforts to learn causal graphs over high-dimensional variables (Entner and Hoyer, 2012; Parviainen and Kaski, 2015).

Altogether, we have an account of how causal variables can

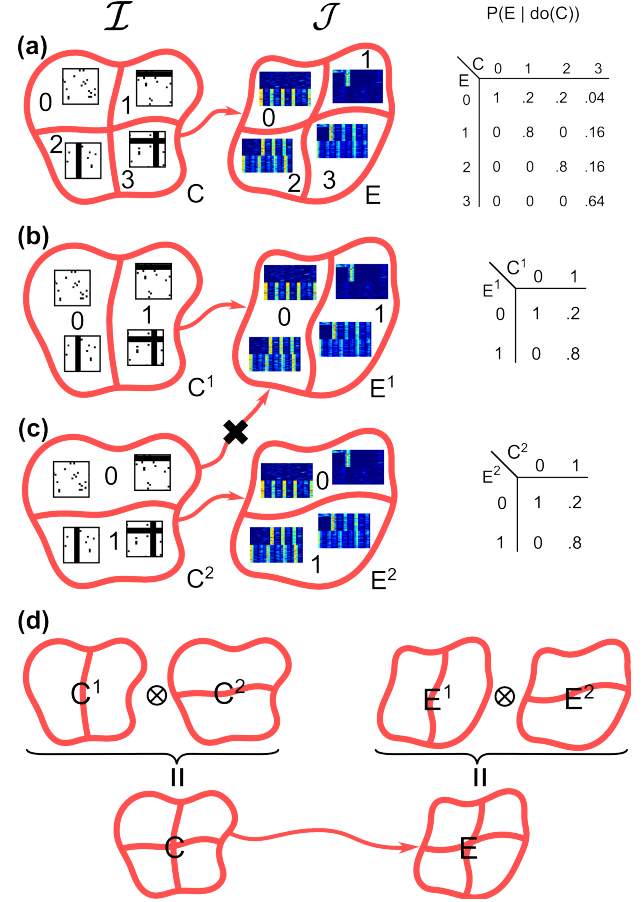


Figure 5: **Subsidiary Causal Variables.** (a) The fundamental cause and effect of our neuroscience example. (b) The subsidiary cause C^1 , “presence of an h-bar”. The corresponding coarsening of C groups together the images which contain no h-bars ($C^1 = 0$) and the images which contain an h-bar ($C^1 = 1$). Similarly, the subsidiary effect of C^1 groups together raster plots with and without the “pulse” behavior. (c) The subsidiary cause C^2 , “presence of a v-bar” and its effect E^2 . Note that E^1 , for example, is *not* an effect of C^2 . If it was, the effects of manipulations $\text{do}(C^2 = 0)$ as well as $\text{do}(C^2 = 1)$ would be ambiguous: $P(E^1 = 1 | \text{do}(C^2 = 1))$ could be either .8 or 0, depending on whether the manipulated micro-variable contains an h-bar or not. (d) C^1 and C^2 are non-interacting subsidiary causes. The effect of their product is the product of their effects.

be identified that does not rely on a definition obtained from domain experts. Given its theoretical generality, we expect our method to be useful in many domains where micro-level data is readily available, but where the relevant causal macro-level factors are still poorly understood.

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